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ABSTRACT

The 1993 book, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The At-Risk Student in the Open-Door College," provided a status report on community college responses to at-risk students, or students who possess academic, social, and economic problems that challenge their success in college. In addition to providing a brief history of at-risk programs and literature and research reviews, the book highlighted 12 exemplary community college programs. Although the programs served different at-risk populations, they shared numerous policy and procedural characteristics. These characteristics, and their implications, can be condensed into the following nine recommendations: (1) pre-enrollment activities should be proactive, offering skills testing to potential students in elementary or high school and occupational testing to adults; (2) orientation should be required of entering students; (3) late registration should be abolished; (4) basic skills assessment and placement should be mandatory, with test data used to place students in appropriate classes; (5) dual enrollment should be eliminated for basic skill and regular academic courses; (6) working students should be strongly encouraged to reduce academic loads to help them better accommodate the demands of work, family, and college; (7) more comprehensive financial aid opportunities and employment for students on campus should be provided; (8) problem-solving and literacy activities should be incorporated into all courses; and (9) student and program outcomes should be evaluated regularly and findings disseminated. (BCY)

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CLIMBING OUT FROM BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF THE AT-RISK STUDENT

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CLIMBING OUT FROM BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF THE AT-RISK STUDENT

John E. and Suanne D. Roueche

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The At-Risk Student in the Open-Door College, a status report on college responses to at-risk students, described selected exemplary community college programs designed to meet the challenges at-risk students create for higher education. The experiences of researching and working with at-risk students over the last 25 years created the expectation of bad news—public school reform that had not been achieved, students leaving school unprepared for today's job market or for college, and a growing adult student population with few academic skills and many outside-college responsibilities. Those expectations were fulfilled, but fortunately, there was also good news—numerous institutions of higher education are designing excellent programs to serve the students who meet the standard, albeit broad, definition of *at-risk*.

Selected Programs and Survey Questions

The term *at-risk* describes the reality of today's students who possess academic, social, and economic problems that challenge their success in college—e.g., poor academic history, low self-concepts, limited world views, an absence of role models, family and employment responsibilities, and financial needs. In addition to a brief history and review of current literature and research, 12 community college programs were highlighted. All had been formally recognized for their success by one or more national organizations that look critically at outcomes of at-risk student programs. Program directors were asked to respond to questions about program goals, objectives, and most successful features; organizational fit; identification and orientation of students; faculty selection and devel-opment; instructional strategies critical to retention; evaluation criteria; and future plans.

Major Findings and Recommendations

The successful programs showcased in this study, and many in the current literature, shared numerous common policy and procedural characteristics—even though they served different at-risk populations. The findings, and their implications, are condensed here into ten broad-brush recommendations.

Pre-enrollment activities should be proactive. It is not unusual to find colleges working closely with elementary and high school students, acquainting them with the campus and available programs. Moreover, colleges offer early and regular skills testing to potential students in an effort to identify those at risk of dropping out or falling behind academically, and then offer developmental supplemental instruction in special classes. In addition, in preparation for college enrollment, colleges are bringing adults to campus for such activities as occupational testing, aptitude assessment, and child care information.

Orientation should be required of entering students. It is critical that entering students become familiar with the norms and values of the college. The majority of at-risk students are the first of their families to attend college. In addition to socializing these students into the milieu they are entering, pairing them with faculty and/or student mentors increases the likelihood of a "bond" with the institution and a stronger personal commitment to program completion. Students who regularly associate with faculty, staff, and other students who have successfully completed similar academic or preparatory courses, will establish relationships that stimulate and reinforce positive student behaviors.

Late registration should be abolished. Colleges that abolish the policy of late registration have first asked two critical questions: How will this decision affect enrollment? and How will this decision affect retention? Advertising a policy change and decreasing the number of late registration days over two or three enrollment periods, until late registration ends the day before classes officially begin, will provide adequate notice for those students who habitually register late. Some colleges report that more than 20 percent of their student body will enroll during the late registration period. Attrition data indicate that students who enroll late in one or more courses are more likely to either withdraw from the course(s) or earn a failing grade than students who register on time.

Basic skills assessment and placement should be mandatory. High school GPA is no longer the best indicator and predictor of student readiness for college work, and colleges must require entry-level assessment of *all* entering students to determine if skill levels are

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adequate for college-level courses. Test data should be used to keep students from enrolling in classes where they have no chance of success and to place them in classes where their skills could be developed to appropriate levels.

Eliminate dual enrollment in basic skill and regular academic courses. Students should not be permitted to enroll in any courses that would require a skill level that initial assessment has determined the student has not yet achieved. Many current and proposed state-legislated mandates require that students failing college entrance skill tests must successfully complete appropriate remediation/development courses prior to enrolling in regular courses; in some states, failure to comply with these requirements can lead to student probation or expulsion, and in others, state funding for programs and institutions may be tied to compliance/enforcement and student performance.

Working students should be strongly encouraged to reduce academic loads. The national average for degree attainment at a community college is now three or more years; for four-year colleges and universities, it is now five years or more. More students are working more hours to continue their studies, and colleges should encourage students to reduce their academic loads to better accommodate the demands of work, family, and college. It is a disservice to students to encourage full or sizable academic loads when they report working more than 30 hours and/or juggling family and household responsibilities.

Provide more comprehensive financial aid opportunities. Abandoning academic goals is the likely alternative chosen by students who are overburdened with impending, growing debt and who cannot find additional financial support. Financial aid opportunities should be made available to students in classrooms and mentoring sessions as well as in the traditional recruitment and registration procedures. Moreover, hiring students to work on campus will keep them in better touch with faculty and peers, and involved with activities in a college setting.

Require problem-solving and literacy activities in all courses. Faculty report that when they confer with other faculty whose courses are linked programmatically to their own, they can better design curriculum and instruction that incorporate improved reading, writing, and thinking skill development activities. Furthermore, they can more readily identify the common elements that link their courses, discuss the strategies by which they can share these elements with their students, and agree upon common measures by which to evaluate the quality of the products of these interdisciplinary literacy activities.

Evaluate student and program outcomes regularly and disseminate the findings. Past research has shown that evaluation and dissemination are generally weak program components; the majority of programs in the present study, however, had carefully developed and implemented evaluation policies and procedures. Evaluation designs were built to measure the accomplishment of (or failure of) specific goals, and results were written in specific terms that clearly described the accomplishments and their significance to students and the institution. Moreover, results were disseminated to critical recipients of evaluation data—those within the institution, such as students, faculty, and administrators; and those outside, such as legislators and other potential sources of funding and support.

Summary

The at-risk student population will not go away; addressing its challenges should not be postponed and cannot be ignored. Discussions about "how *best* to do it" should be replaced with "beginning *somewhere* and doing it *now*." While the majority of the programs investigated were designed to serve a limited number of students and/or a well-defined group, the critical pieces that make them successful could well support expansion to the broader student population.

All those working in community colleges are caught between a rock and a hard place, as surely as is America. The gaps in education and in society between preparedness and demand are serious; but while the news is bad, the situation is not hopeless unless community colleges refuse to apply to the current situation the same level of courage and creativity successfully applied to a myriad of other challenges.

John E. Roueche is professor and director of the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin, where he holds the Sid W. Richardson Regents Chair. Suanne D. Roueche is director of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) and editor of Innovation Abstracts and Linkages, at The University of Texas at Austin.

Editor's Note: *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The At-Risk Student in the Open-Door College* (Roueche, John E. and Roueche, Suanne D. Washington, DC: The Community College Press, 1993) will be featured on "Author, Author!" a special program in the PBS Adult Learning Series, March 31, 11:00-12:00 a.m. Eastern time. (Check local listings for the time in your area.) Jerry Owens, president of Cuyahoga Community College, will serve as moderator as the authors discuss their study and findings using video clips from selected college programs.

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Larry Johnson, editor

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